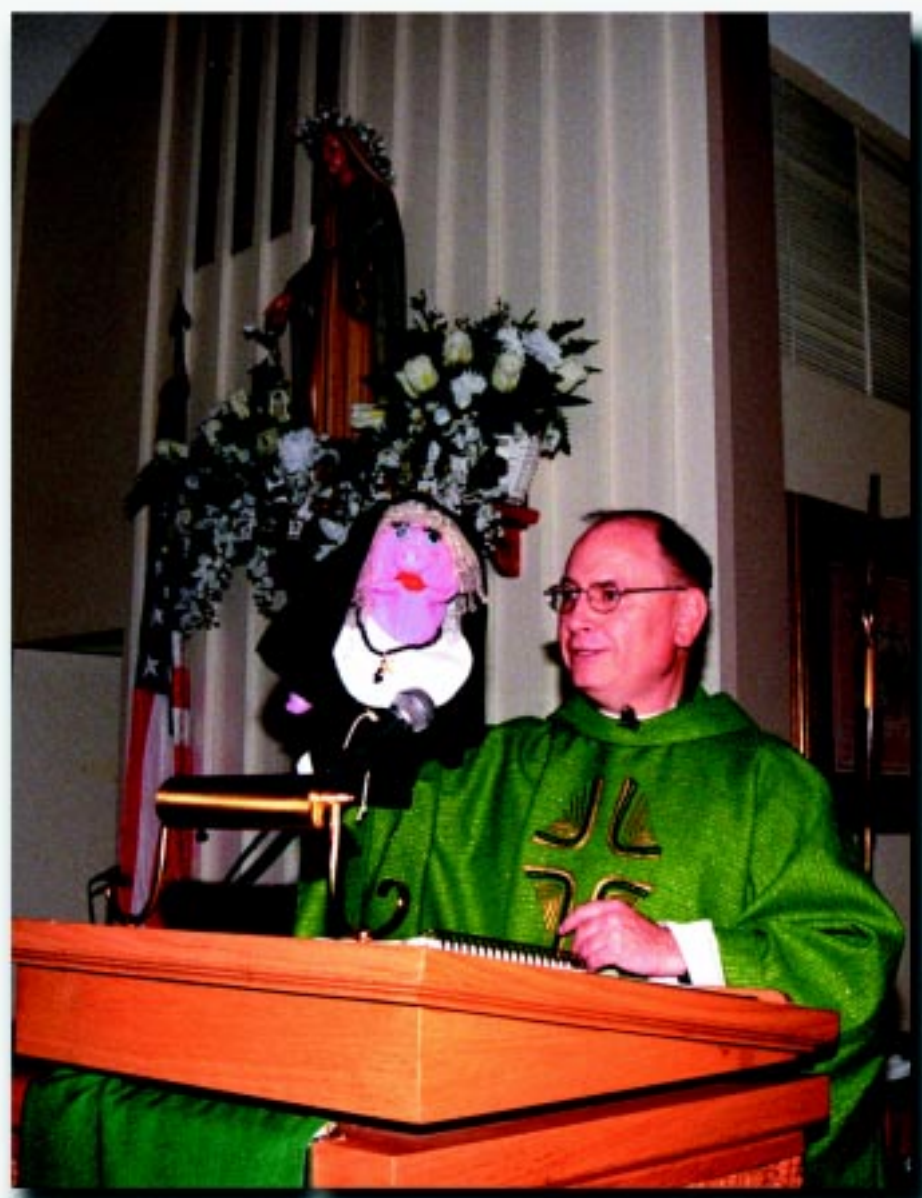


Serving God and country

Chaplains, assistants answer to a higher calling



Victoria R. Corridore silently prays before a service.



Father Patrick Fletcher uses the assistance of "Sister Piggy" when inviting the children in his service to Children's Church.

BY STAFF SGT. A.C. EGGMAN
62nd Airlift Wing Public Affairs

They were the same uniforms as the rest of the blue-suiters, but their mission is slightly different. They serve for many of the same reasons other servicemembers do, however, it's what they do and how that sets Air Force chaplains and chaplain assistants apart from everyone else.

"I became a chaplain to serve God and country at the same time," said Chaplain (Lt. Col.) James N. Cutter, 62nd Airlift Wing chaplain. "I was keenly aware of the tremendous pressure placed on military members to make life and death decisions, often at a moments notice."

Because of that, said the 17-year veteran, military members must have a strong foundation of morals and ethics on which to base such decisions.

"It is my hope that my work with military people and their families will help strengthen those important values," Cutter said.

The Chaplain Service provides guidance to more than 350,000 Air Force members by supporting the religious needs of all assigned members at bases, industrial complexes, medical facilities, geographically separated units and to deployed locations.

"The Chaplain Service does not make judgements as to the validity of a particular faith," said Master Sgt. David E. Lilly, 62nd AW Chapel Division NCO in Charge. "It is our job to help each Air Force person to have their particular religious needs met."

At McChord, the chapel offers the standard Protestant and Catholic worship services and religious education. Although similar to civilian churches, Air Force chapel programs are unique in many ways, said Lilly.

The chapel does not represent a specific denomination and the staff tries to meet every faith's requirements. The chapel also provides a general style of worship designed to appeal to a wider cross-section of worshippers.

Air Force chaplains provide many services parallel to those available within the civilian community from worship services to counseling. However, the religious services Air Force chaplains provide emphasize common values and minimize differences.

"An Air Force chaplain has a unique opportunity to enter people's lives in a natural way either at work or at leisure," said Cutter, a Washington native. "This openness allows us to build bridges of

acceptance and friendship."

Trust is developed more easily that way, said Cutter.

"If a crisis event occurs in a person's life, the chaplain is viewed as a trusted friend — someone who is considered to be 'one of us,'" said Cutter. "Because this occurs in the work place and the chapel community, a much larger group of people can be helped and supported through the difficult times of life."

Difficult times can and do happen to military members. Unlike the people they protect, military members are often called upon to defend their nation or national interests at a moment's notice.

"Our role is vital to the military community," said Cutter, who has been at McChord a year. "Spiritual health is fundamental to the overall well-being of its members and their families."

"Spiritual care in the work environment or when deployed is one of the distinct differences between a military chaplain and a civilian church," he said. "The Department of Defense takes very seriously every military member and their families' right to exercise free religion."

As a result of DOD's resolve, chaplains are involved in most aspects of military life to aid in that constitutional right. But they don't do it alone. The four chaplains at McChord have help from two enlisted members known as chaplain assistants.

"The closest equivalent to a chaplain's assistant in the civilian world is a church business administrator," said Lilly. "The administrator manages a church, primarily the financial records and the staff, but that is only a small part of what we do."

The chaplain assistant manages the facilities, supplies and equipment; helps set up and oversee worship services and chapel programs; and greet visitors.

The chaplain assistant provides a vital link in the chain between the chaplain and the wing, said Lilly, who became a chaplain's assist to help other Air Force members and to make a difference in their lives.

"Many times we are the first face someone sees when they come into the chapel support center," said the Florida native. "It is crucial we make a good impression and ensure the person receives the proper care and support they need from our chaplains. No one else can do this as effectively and as caring as the chaplain's assistant."

Lilly, a 21-year veteran, often jokes about being the chaplains' bodyguards during a deployment.

"We are force extenders for the chaplains," Lilly said. Unlike chaplains, the



Charles W. Ashbaugh

assistant is issued a weapon and is responsible for the chaplain's safety as well as their own during deployments.

On the average, assistants deploy every 15 months. Lilly has deployed to many places such as Bosnia, Italy and Kuwait and in support of operations like Desert Shield and Desert Storm. The primary difference between ministry at home base versus a deployed location is the assistant becomes more involved in support.

"We are an extra set of eyes and ears," said Lilly. "We help the chaplains assess the site morale and foresee any potential problems which may need their intervention."

And even though chaplain's assistants aren't trained or authorized to counsel an Air Force member, "we can be a listening ear when chaplains need it," he said.

Cutter, who has been deployed to the Middle East and Europe, said they perform the similar functions deployed as they do at home. Whether they minister to the people at home or across the globe, Lilly and Cutter agreed it can be difficult to help others at times.

"This really can be an emotionally, physically and spiritually exhaustive work," said Cutter. The chaplain said the hardest part of the job is ministering to people whose lives have been devastated, especially those he has connected with.

"It is extremely difficult because I have to work very hard to maintain a sense of calm in the midst of the storm," he said. "I find it difficult to deal with my own emotional issues while trying to help them work with their needs."

While many people in the helping professions find it difficult to maintain a balance and perspective once they have connected with someone, establishing that early rapport is what helps both get through those difficult times, Cutter said.

Lilly said the hardest part of his job hasn't happened for him yet. "It will in a few years...when I leave to retire," he said.



Charles W. Ashbaugh

Members of the congregation are sometimes asked to assist in the mass.



Daniel Thompson

A view from the choir's loft during a memorial service Tuesday.